

Locals to Guard: Tanks a lot

Armored training site plan ripped

By Tom Gibb
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CLEARFIELD, Pa. — The Pennsylvania National Guard plans to move into reclaimed strip mines that cover the lonely northeast of Clearfield County and teach its soldiers, up to 200 at a time, to drive tanks and other heavy military equipment.

There's an unintended touch of realism there. The soldiers would be operating in what's becoming enemy territory.

In August, rumors heard by local officials about a tank-driving range were confirmed — not by Guard representatives, but in a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette story.

Ever since, those officials complain, the Guard has stayed mum, even now, a few weeks from sealing the purchase of most of the land.

The silence has bred suspicion that Guard officials in the state Department of Military and Veterans Affairs are sneaking one over, planning to bring in a center that will disrupt a 5,400-acre swath of two lightly populated townships before anyone can object.

"What are they doing, and why all the secrecy?" said Bill Maines, a Clearfield resident who owns a camp in the heart of the proposed tank training site.

"They're secretive about everything and I'm tired of it," said Lanie Davis, a township supervisor in Girard, the municipality where most of the complex would be developed. "I'm getting all negativity from the people who live here."

Lt. Col. Chris Cleaver, a Guard spokesman, said in an interview last week that the neighbors' prime

fears wouldn't come true. Scores of houses are peppered through the tract, but Cleaver vowed that the Guard wouldn't seize any land through eminent domain and that experts would find where the Guard can run equipment — and fire dummy rounds — without rattling neighbors.

He has a lot of selling to do, though.

Between them, the two target townships — Girard and neighboring Goshen — have 990 residents. When the state House Democratic Policy Committee held a hearing about the Guard's plans at a Clearfield motel Wednesday night, though, more than 100 people, most with property in Girard and Goshen, jammed the conference room.

Five Democratic legislators came. So did local officials. But Guard representatives declined their invitation. "We want to get out there and start publicly talking, but we won't until we have the facts," Cleaver said.

Without fresh information, the crowd vented on the Guard.

"It stinks. Something really smells here," said state Rep. Daniel Surra of St. Marys, Elk County, whose district covers the proposed tank training site.

"Some people have some outstanding properties and some pretty nice houses up there, and if I were one of them, I'd be sick about now," said John Gwin Foreman, an Altoona environmental consultant.

In Harrisburg, Republicans dismissed the hearing as a political circus where Democrats could ricochet potshots off the Guard toward Gov. Ridge. But critics note that most of the land in question is controlled by a Ridge backer.

Of the initial 4,700-acre purchase, 4,200 acres are controlled by C. Alan Walker, chief executive of local Bradford Coal Co., a man with a

record of largesse toward Republicans.

He belongs to Ridge's Governor's Leadership Circle, where entree is \$10,000 to Ridge's political funds. Walker and his father have given the Ridge campaign \$90,064 over the past six years, The Associated Press reported.

Initially, the guard had been looking at someone else's property. That man, Glyn Powell, has raised questions about why his property was no longer being considered.

Although Ridge supports the project, "Neither the governor nor anyone on his staff was involved" in site selection, Ridge spokesman Steve Aaron said. "There was no influence, no phone calls made. We weren't aware of it, period."

"The governor and I have never talked about this issue," Walker said.

There also are questions about the amount the state has pledged to pay.

The state is spending about \$4.3 million on the bulk of the land, the 4,700 acres, the Guard's Cleaver said. That averages \$915 an acre in a region where real estate appraisers say plentiful reclaimed strip mine land goes for \$500 to \$600 in bulk. State law bars the state Game Commission from paying more than \$300 an acre for similar land.

Walker would not estimate the average he got but said it was "fair market value ... less than \$900 an acre."

Maybe the state is overpaying. Maybe all is fair, and the average is skewed by anomalies, such as one plot of ground with a large lodge. State officials won't say.

Sellers have signed sales agreements, according to Samantha Elliott, spokeswoman for the Department of General Services, the state's land broker. But she won't reveal prices until state officials seal

the deals, probably within a few weeks, she said.

"It's law," she said. "It's not considered a public document until everything's signed."

It has been 3½ years since Guard representatives went land hunting in Clearfield. But the Guard's first public meeting on the project isn't until April 6 and 7, at the fire hall in tiny LeContes Mills, a village at the edge of the property.

Cleaver said the Guard would minimize disruption — for instance, that live ammunition would be banned in favor of quieter dummy rounds. But critics want specifics.

"It's one thing for somebody to do this in daylight," Foreman said. "It's another thing to fire a tank at 2 in the morning."

State law may open a public peephole to the Guard plan. Well before the April meetings, Guard officials want to meet township officials. "But they told me they didn't want it advertised," said Davis, the Girard supervisor. The state Sunshine Act bars closed sessions unless officials are discussing personnel actions, pending legal actions or ongoing real estate negotiations — none of which apply here.

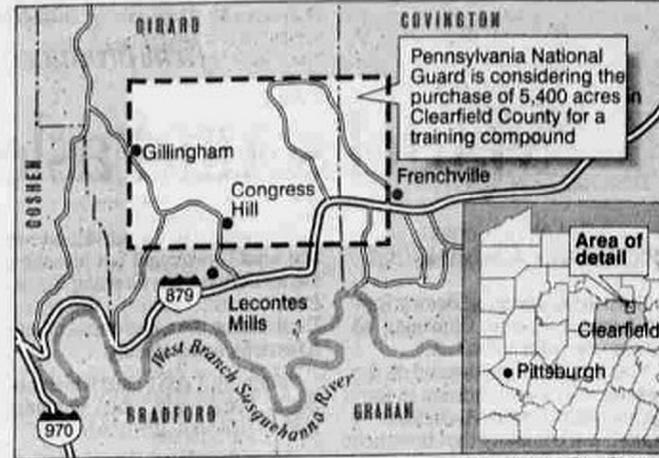
"I have to advertise it," Davis said.

Another concern for public officials is that the Guard's land will be tax-exempt.

Tom Bell, chairman of the Girard supervisors, figures that 3,483 of the initial 4,700 acres are in his township — eliminating, he guesses, up to \$4,000 of the township's \$11,000 annual real estate tax revenue.

There's no ready financial bonanza in return. Full-time employment at the complex probably won't top a dozen workers, Cleaver said.

"I don't see how we can benefit," Bell said. "Now, I support the National Guard, but I'd support them more elsewhere."



Diane Juravich/Post-Gazette

The tank training facility, the Western Maneuver Area, could be ready by 2003. There, 10,000 soldiers — up to 200 at a time — would drive M-1 tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles and other equipment, Cleaver said.

The Guard says it needs the ground because space is short at the force's 19,200-acre home, Fort Indiantown Gap, 20 miles northeast of Harrisburg.

"The vehicles move faster now. We need more room to use them," Cleaver said. "The M-1 tank is 60 tons of fast-moving metal. The vision is for Fort Indiantown Gap to be an installation where people come to squeeze triggers, and you'll go to the Western Maneuver Area to drive tanks."

The Guard picked Clearfield, in part, for its interchange with Interstate 80 about 10 miles away, a rail head 15 miles away at Clearfield, and because most of the land involved was strip-mined. "You can't buy pristine land for military purposes," Cleaver said. "You get chased away."

In the spring of 1996, Guard representatives came to Clearfield and took Walker and fellow coal man Powell for a helicopter ride to see two of Walker's properties and one of Powell's, according to Walker.

Powell is a coal equipment repair expert who took over a failing Clearfield County coal company, Power Operating Co., rather than see it vanish along with heavy debt it owed him.

He saw cash coming when Guard officials lauded his acreage, straddling the line between southeast Clearfield and Centre counties, 20 miles from Walker's land.

"We told them \$600 an acre," said Foreman, a consultant to Powell. "I would've been able to bring him down to \$400."

"Of all the properties that we have looked at, [Powell's] offers the best training area for our soldiers and equipment," National Guard Col. Paul Neatrow wrote in a June 1997 memo to Col. John Von Trott.

But Powell — his company idled now, under bankruptcy court protection — hasn't heard from Guard representatives for 15 months.

But Walker said that after dropping Powell off from the helicopter ride, Guard officials flew off to see Walker's land.

"They said, 'The site you showed us last is the one we're interested in,'" Walker said.

Cleaver said Walker's land outscored Powell's. "We got the best property."